

# COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

January 17, 2008

## GUALALA ACCESS TRAILS REVISION

File No. 05-014-02

Project Manager: Deborah Hirst

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to revise the Gualala Access Trails project authorized by the Conservancy on May 18, 2005 by removing the planned construction of cable steps and trail improvements to the beach at St. Orres in Gualala, Mendocino County, and adding the construction of up to two viewing platforms with interpretive panels above the highly erosive bluff at St. Orres.

**LOCATION:** Gualala, Mendocino County

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Public Access

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### **EXHIBITS**

Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Site Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [May 18, 2005 Staff Recommendation](#)

Exhibit 3: [Geology Report and Revised Management Plan](#)

Exhibit 4: [Letters of Support](#)

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### **RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Section 9 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby revises the Gualala Trails public access project approved by the Conservancy on May 18, 2005 by removing the planned construction of cable steps and trail improvements to the beach at St. Orres in Gualala, Mendocino County, and adding the construction of up to two viewing platforms with interpretive panels above the highly erosive bluff at Saint Orres Creek.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated by the Conservancy on September 20, 2007.

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2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state's coastline.
  3. The Redwood Coast Land Conservancy is a private nonprofit organization existing under Section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.
  4. The project will serve greater than local needs."
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### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

The Conservancy approved the Gualala Access Trails project on May 18, 2005 and authorized disbursement of up to one hundred thousand dollars (\$100,000) to the Redwood Coast Land Conservancy (RCLC) to construct the Bourn's Landing/Bonham Beach and St. Orres Creek Trail projects in Gualala, California (See Exhibit 1: Site Location and Exhibit 2: May 18, 2005 Staff Recommendation). The Bourn's Landing/Bonham Beach portion of the project is proceeding as planned and described in Exhibit 2. However, as RCLC moved forward with the permitting for the St. Orres Creek Trail, it became apparent that the underlying geology in the final stretch of the planned trail made construction of the proposed cable steps infeasible, and there is no feasible alternative to provide safe access down to the beach at the mouth of St. Orres Creek (Exhibit 3). The RCLC now proposes to construct trail improvements from Highway 1 including steps and landings down to a small area mid-way down the ravine where up to two small viewing platforms with interpretive panels will be constructed overlooking the ocean and creek.

The revised St. Orres Creek Ocean Access project seeks to provide safe public access to viewing platforms and interpretive panels above the beach, correct existing erosion above the viewing area, and minimize future trail impacts. The existing informal trail and steep first section are to be abandoned due to hazardous highway conditions, as well as other unsafe features. With CalTrans approval, access to the trail will be provided from an existing paved parking area immediately to the south. From there, a new trail section will be built through CalTrans property, running generally parallel to and below the highway, north to the point where it meets the existing rough trail. From that point, RCLC will rehabilitate the existing trail bed down to a beach overlook. Up to two modest size platforms will be constructed to fit within the large trees in the ravine. The trail will end at these platforms and no formal access will be developed along the eroding cliff face or down the precipitous 15-foot drop to the beach. Staff recommends this approach as it will provide a new, safe coastal access amenity for local residents and visitors to the Gualala area.

The Redwood Coast Land Conservancy is a volunteer run organization which has worked effectively to accept a number of offers to dedicate and provide public access to the coast in Mendocino County. The Conservancy has provided support to RCLC for several projects, including the acquisition of the Hearn Gulch Headlands and implementation of the Coastal Trail along the bluff in Gualala.

**Site Description:** The easement at St. Orres Creek comprises approximately 1/3 acre of property known as the Erickson parcel, and is located roadside at a steep embankment that drops down to

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a small, scenic pocket beach north of Gualala. The highly erosive bluff leading down to the beach has been assessed by a geologist and whose report recommends avoiding attempts to develop beach access down this unstable area. The proposed viewing platforms will enable the public to enjoy the spectacular coastal scenery in a safe location.

**Project History:** RCLC accepted a total of four offers to dedicate public access easements – three vertical and one lateral – for Bourn’s Landing/Bonham Beach and St. Orres Creek on July 1, 2003 and July 3, 2002, respectively. RCLC prepared plans and filed a coastal development permit application for the Bourn’s Landing/Bonham Beach on May 3, 2004. That application was approved and construction is being completed during the fall of 2007. RCLC also prepared a plan for the St. Orres Creek accessway and submitted a coastal development permit application on April 29, 2005. The County denied the permit due to concerns for the proposed cable step feature at the end of the proposed trail leading to the beach. Subsequent consultation with a geologist, a surveyor and staff from Caltrans, the Coastal Commission and the Conservancy, led to a revised management plan which takes into account the highly erosive cliff edge and limited possibilities for a safe, affordable trail down to the beach in this location. The plan includes construction of up to two small viewing platforms with interpretive signage on the geology and natural resources of the area in place of an engineered solution to the erosion and difficult access to the beach. As discussed under the “Project Summary” section, the Conservancy approved the Gualala Access Trails project on May 18, 2005, and authorized the disbursement of up to \$100,000 for the construction of the Bourn’s Landing/Bonham Beach and St. Orres Creek accessways.

### **PROJECT FINANCING:**

No new funds are proposed for authorization. The RCLC will redirect a portion of the funds approved by the Conservancy on May 18, 2005 from the beach trail to the revised St. Orres project.

### **CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:**

The proposed project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 of Division 21 (Sections 31400 *et seq.*) of the Public Resources Code. Section 31400 states the Legislature’s intent that the Conservancy have a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state’s coastline. To carry out that role, under Sections 31400.1 and 31400.3, the Conservancy is authorized to provide grants to a nonprofit organization to develop lands and to provide such assistance as is required to aid nonprofit organizations in establishing a system of public coastal accessways on the coast. Consistent with this authorization, the proposed project will construct a coastal accessway. RCLC, which will carry out the proposed project, is a private nonprofit organization existing under §501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, having among its principal charitable purposes the preservation of land for recreational, educational, agricultural, scenic and open space opportunities.

The California Coastal Commission and Conservancy have adopted standards and recommendations for accessway location and development to ensure a consistent approach is used for access construction. Staff has reviewed the proposed project descriptions and found them to be in conformance with the accessway standards and recommendations as follows:

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- The revised St. Orres Creek trail project is designed to safely accommodate public use, and are therefore consistent with Standard 1.
- The revised St. Orres Creek trail project will correct the existing hazardous accessway, and is therefore consistent with Standard 2.
- The revised St. Orres Creek trail project will be constructed no wider than is necessary to provide safe access, therefore the proposed projects are consistent with Standard 3.
- The absence of adjacent homes ensures that the revised St. Orres Creek trail projects are consistent with Standard 4, which provides for the design to protect the privacy of property owners residing near the trail.
- The project has been sited to avoid or minimize impacts to any environmentally sensitive habitat areas. Therefore, the project is consistent with Standard 5.
- The revised St. Orres Creek trail project will be constructed, where possible, to comply with the guidelines for lateral and vertical accessways, trails, and scenic overlooks expressed in standards 6 through 9. Therefore, the proposed project is consistent with standards 6 through 9.

### **CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S 2007 STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 1 Objective C** and **Goal 2 Objective C** of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the revised St. Orres Creek trail project consists of establishing an approximately 100-foot vertical accessway to up to two scenic overlooks above St. Orres Creek beach off Highway One, thereby completing the development and opening of an easement created by the acceptance of an offer-to-dedicate. The trails will provide a scenic overlook and footpath.

### **CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated on September 20, 2007, in the following respects:

#### **Required Criteria**

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** See letters of support, attached as Exhibit 4.
4. **Location:** The proposed project is located within the coastal zone of the town of Gualala.

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5. **Need:** The RCLC is an all-volunteer nonprofit organization that has committed to the task of accepting and opening the aforementioned offer to dedicate. Conservancy assistance is now needed to enable the RCLC to develop and open the trail.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The Mendocino coast is a statewide and national scenic and recreational destination. State Highway 1 is the closest public road to the trail, and has traffic counts of approximately 6,000 vehicles per day in the summer. In addition, RCLC monitors use of the nearby Gualala Blufftop Trail, also funded by the Conservancy, on a weekly basis, and reports usage of more than 20,000 people per year.

### Additional Criteria

12. **Readiness:** RCLC is now poised to implement the revised the project.
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** The Conservancy has worked with RCLC on many coastal access endeavors, including the Gualala Blufftop Trail project and the Hearn Gulch and Schwab property acquisitions, since 1994. Completion of this project will further the Conservancy's goal of seeing accessways created by acceptance of offers to dedicate opened to the public, build upon the Conservancy's efforts in developing and opening additional accessways, and further the development of an off-highway route for the California Coastal Trail.

### **CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the relevant portions of the Coastal Element of the Mendocino County Land Use Plan, which is part of the Local Coastal Program (LCP). The LCP was certified by the Coastal Commission on September 10, 1992.

The Land Use Plan contains coastal element policies pertaining to shoreline access. Policy number 3.6-6 states in relevant part that "Shoreline access points shall be at frequent rather than infrequent intervals for the convenience of both residents and visitors and to minimize impacts on marine resources at any one point."

The proposed project will complete a public pedestrian access trail over an accepted access easement in Gualala, directly overlooking the Pacific Ocean. The proposed project is thus consistent with the relevant policies contained in the Mendocino County LCP.

### **COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:**

The proposed revised trail project at St. Orres Creek is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) for the following reasons:

The proposed project qualifies as a Class 4 categorical exemption pursuant to 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15304 to the extent that it consists of minor alterations in the condition of land and vegetation which do not involve removal of healthy, mature, scenic trees. Aspects of the project exempt under this section include brush clearing along a narrow trail corridor. The revised project will involve only minimal grading.

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The proposed revised project also qualifies as a Class 3 categorical exemption pursuant to §15303 to the extent that it consists of construction of limited numbers of new, small structures consisting of a series of wooden stairs, walkway landings and up to two small viewing platforms.

The proposed project is located primarily in a narrow stream canyon, but will be sited so as to avoid ecologically sensitive habitat areas, notably the riparian zone near the creek.

Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon Conservancy approval of this project.